

Reconciliation is Not For Cowards

Sermon to the convention of The Diocese of East Carolina

February 10, 2006 The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Eph. 2:13-14) Now, this is one of those things that I sure wish God had given me a call about. Because if the idea was to break down the hostility, I can tell you quite unequivocally that God would have been better off to leave the wall up. That is, if peace was what God wanted. Walls work perfectly well to preserve the peace. Walls work perfectly well to avoid the hostility, or at least to contain it. It is the fact that we don't have them that gets us into a whole mess of trouble. I learned this as the parent of two teenage boys. Having two boys share a room is a very bad idea, at least for the room. And I had the holes in the drywall to prove it. And then, as teenagers, I learned that separate rooms were not enough. Separate floors of the house were a good idea. And so, when the boys were teenagers, we looked for a house with more room. We found one. My younger son had a room of his own on the upper floor. My older son had the basement. Ginger and I had the main floor. Everyone had room to spread out. And that eliminated a lot of conflict. You would think God would have known better. I could have told God a better way to do it. What we need to preserve the peace is more walls, not less. Now there is, I found out, a little problem with my plan. It became possible, especially after the boys were able to drive, for us to go days at a time without being together. It was possible, for that matter, to go pretty long without even seeing each other. Things were quieter. Things may have even been easier. Easier is not always better. The problem with human relationships is that the only way to avoid the conflict in them, the only way to avoid the hostility in them, is not to have them. There was no problem in the garden, after all, as long as there was just one human there. It was the addition of the second that set things going wrong. At first it was lies, deceit, and blaming. In just one generation it was murder. The truth is that it is safer if we are separated by walls. The only problem with that is that there is something lacking and that lack is intolerable. In order for us to be safe from conflict and hostility, what we have to lack is each other. Over and over we are tempted to put walls up, no less than I wanted to separate my boys onto different floors in our house and for exactly the same reason. The surest way to avoid conflict is to avoid each other. That, of course, is exactly what God in Christ will not allow. God, in fact, goes beyond tearing down the walls. God throws us together. If I had been God, I would have done this differently, but as it is, it turns out we can't find God without finding each other. The two things necessarily go together. There is no taking the easy way out that the walls provide for either—for finding ourselves or for finding God. We have tried it many times. And we are still trying it. God will not have it. We are trying it now in the West Bank along the border between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. That wall has a purpose I can well understand. It may even have a certain temporary

necessity, but the problem is that the massive investment in building it does not suggest a temporary intention. It divides enemies from one another but the biblical solution to one's enemies is to love them and not to separate them. When we divide any people, even our enemies, we sin. It is not just the Israelis and the Palestinians, of course. It cuts much closer to home along our southern border with the nation of Mexico. Building a literal wall there has also been suggested. And the danger there is less our national security than our economic privilege. I confess that I cannot speak authoritatively to issues of national security. I can speak with some authority as to what the Bible says. What divides human beings from one another is not of God.

God intends to break down all the walls, whether they are in the form of national boundaries of security zones or maybe even unjust immigration laws. There can be no true peace that is bought at the cost of separation. That is the easy way out. That is the way of peace-making for cowards. True peace in Christ can only be obtained when we find the courage to live together in all our differences, in all our fear, in all our suspicion, in all our greed, in all our humanity. That is the will of God, this God who made of one blood all the peoples of the earth. Peace at the price of separation is really no peace at all. Any coward can avoid conflict by separating. What God has in mind is much more complicated than that and infinitely more costly than that.

We in The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion now face a great moment of potential separation. We indeed have our conflicts. We have had precious little peace in our church these last three years, and perhaps longer than that. We are faced with the question posed squarely by Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Will we keep the peace by separating from one another? Will we avoid conflict by reversing the work of Christ? Will we resolve our hostility by erecting a wall between us, a wall that is just a figment of our imaginations, after all, as if the Christians down the road really were in Rwanda or the Christians over there really were in Bolivia or the Christians the next state up really were in Africa? It is, I will admit, a tempting solution. It has been the solution of us human beings for centuries. It is a solution for cowards. It is a solution for cowards because, of course, it is no solution at all. It is a solution for the faithless because it is utterly without faith at all. It is a solution that runs directly contrary to the will of God. It is a solution that is beneath the dignity of disciples of Jesus. "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Separation is ludicrous, for one thing, because we lack the power to do it. We have been made one, whether we like it or not, no matter who likes it or not, in the blood of Christ Jesus. I am one with you and you are one with me and we are one with our brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh and in South Carolina and in Fort Worth and in Uganda and in Nigeria and in Singapore and in Rwanda and in India and in England. You will not convince me that there is some principle in the Bible that supports separation. The biblical imperative is to unity—that we may be one as Christ and the Father are one. The biblical imperative is not to agreement at least not if the Book of Acts or the Pauline epistles are any indication. But there is no doubt that the moral imperative of the Christian faith is to unity—because God has willed it and Christ's sacrifice has made it so. When exactly was it that morality became a word we use to talk about sex instead of a word we use to talk about peace

and justice, which are the building blocks of unity? The unity that Christ accomplished and that the letter to the Ephesians celebrates is full of courage and commitment and love and faith. It is not some pretty picture or fairy tale. The picture it paints is the picture of Calvary and the cross. And, my friends, we do not have the power, let alone the right, to undo it. Separation is ludicrous, for another thing, because our unity is the absolutely essential building block of our mission. That mission, as Christ defined it, was the ministry of reconciliation, the continuation of his own work on the cross. "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." That is the way the Catechism puts it. The mission we like to talk so much about is undermined before we even start if we are not reconciled people ourselves, at one with ourselves, one because we are "one Body, under one Head, our Lord Jesus Christ." We cannot take the easy way out. It is easy enough to be reconciled or to live in a way that looks like being reconciled because it is free from conflict if we are free from relationships, if we are free from contact with others, if we live on opposite sides of a wall. Anybody can be reconciled if there is no one else there. Reconciliation with the benefit of dividing walls is for cowards. The making of peace is not. Will we be cowards at this moment or not? Will we separate or not? And we can't get out of it so easily by blaming the separation on someone else. The conservatives can't say to the liberals, "I didn't leave the Church, the Church left me." That is nonsensical, Alice in Wonderland doubletalk. And the liberals can't say to the conservatives, "Oh, you'll come along and see things our way if you just give it time." Talk like that is for cowards who don't want to do the hard work of reconciling real relationships. The work of reconciliation is not for the faint of heart. Can any of us doubt that it is the intention of God? Can any of us doubt that is the way Christ lived and died? Can any of us doubt that it is the reason Christ rose from the dead and will come again? The question, and the only question, is whether we have the heart for reconciliation or not. Have we set our hearts on being reconciled in Christ or not? It is our only hope because reconciliation is not for cowards. Amen. The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, Bishop of Lexington